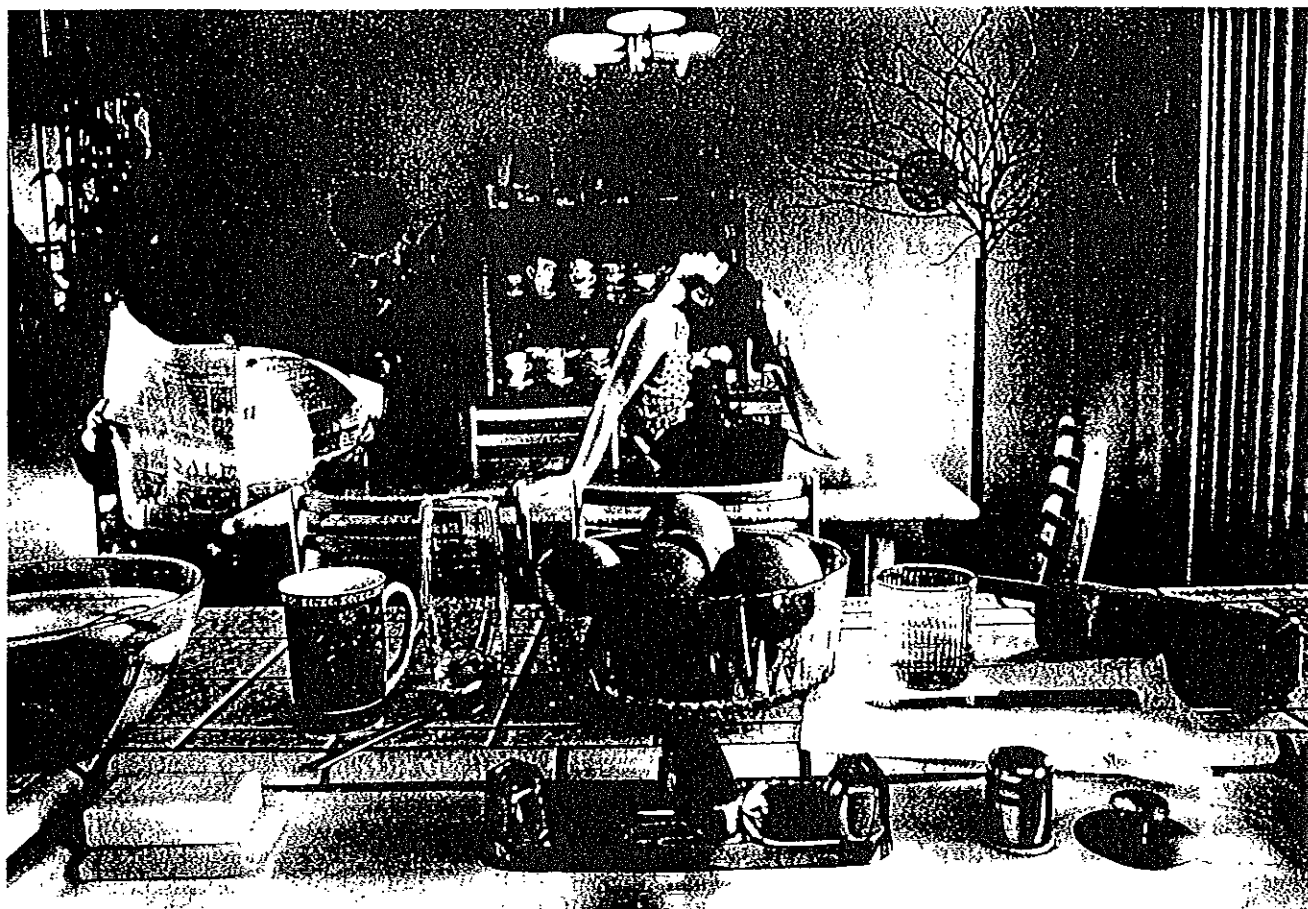


HOW WAS IT, REALLY?

Theirs was the last divorce of all.

BY JOHN UPDIKE



INCREASINGLY, Ed Franklin had trouble remembering how it had actually been in the broad middle stretch of his life when he was living with his first wife and helping her, however distractedly, raise their children. His second marriage, which had once seemed so shiny and amazing and new, now was as old as his first had been—twenty-two years, exactly—when he had, one ghastly weekend, left it. His second wife, Vanessa, and he lived in a house much too big for them yet so full of souvenirs and fragile inherited treasures that they could not imagine living elsewhere. In their present circle of friends, the main

gossip was of health and death, whereas once the telephone wires had buzzed with word of affairs and divorces. His present wife would set down the telephone to announce that Herbie Edgerton's cancer had come back and appeared to be into his lymph nodes and bones now; thirty years ago, his first wife, Alissa, would hang up and ask him if they were free for drinks and take-out pizza at the Bradleys' this Saturday. Yes, she would go on, it was such short notice that it would have been rude from anybody but the Bradleys. They were socially voracious, now that psychotherapy had helped them to see that they couldn't stand each

other. Everybody's mental and marital health, Ed remembered, was frail, so frail that women, meeting, would follow their "How are you?" with "No, how are you really?"

And then—this with an averted glance and the hint of a blush from Alissa—she had seen Wendy Martin in the superette and impulsively asked her and Jim to drinks tomorrow evening. She had said yes, they'd love to, but they couldn't stay more than a minute, Jim had the Planning Commission meeting, they were fending off this evil out-of-state developer who wanted to turn the entire old Crossman estate into Swiss-chalet-

BETH VARNELLE EDWARDS, "NOWATO, NO. 1" (1995)

style condos. Just paraphrasing Jim's flighty wife made Alissa glow. This at least was vivid in Ed's memory, the way her eyes would become bluer and her cheeks, a bit sallower normally, pink, and her lips, usually pursed and pensive, would dance into remarks and laughter when Jim was near or in prospect. He couldn't blame her; he had been as bad as she, looking outside the home for strength to keep the home going. The formula had worked only up to a point—perhaps the point, somewhere in their forties, when they realized that life wasn't endless. They had been, actually, among the last in their old set to get divorced; they had stayed on the sinking ship while its deck tilted and its mast splintered and its sails flapped, whipping loose line everywhere.

A teetotaler now (weight, liver, conflicting pills), Ed could remember the drinks—drinks on porches and docks, on boats and lawns, in living rooms and kitchens and dens. The high metallic sheen of gin, the slightly more viscid transparency of vodka, the grain-golden huskiness of bourbon, the paler, caustic timbre of Scotch, the column of beer with its rising fluting of bubbles, the sprig of mint, the slice of orange, the chunk of lime, the delicate bowls of white and red wine floating above the glass table on their invisible stems, the little sticky-rimmed glasses of anisette and Cointreau and B & B and green Chartreuse that followed dinner, chasing the minutes toward midnight, while the more prudent, outsiderish guests peeked at their watches, thinking of the babysitter and tomorrow's sickly-sweet headache. He remembered, from the viewpoint of a host, the magnanimous crunch of ice cubes broken out of their aluminum trays with an authoritative yank of the divider lever, and the pantry's high-shouldered array of half-gallon bottles from the liquor mart beside the superette, the cost of liquor a kind of dues you cheerfully paid for membership in the unchartered club of young couples. How curiously filling and adequate it was, the constant society of the same dozen or so people. Western frontiersmen, Ed remembered reading somewhere, said of buffalo meat that, strange to say, you

never tired of eating it. The Franklins' friends would arrive for weekday drinks at six, harried and mussed, children in tow—the women bedraggled by a day of housework, the men with their city pallor fresh off the train—and be slowly transformed; dizzily confident and glamorous and *intime*, they would not leave much before eight, when the time had long passed to get the children decently fed (they had been devouring potato chips and Fig Newtons around the kitchen television) and into bed.

"How did you and Mom *do* it?" Ed's sons and daughters asked him, with genuine admiration, of his old servantless four-child household. His children as they homed in on forty lived in city apartments or virtually gated New Jersey enclaves, with one or two children of their own, whose nurture and protection required daily shifts of Caribbean women, tag-team caregivers, one to achieve the dressing and the administration of breakfast and safe passage to nursery school, and another to supervise the evening meal and bath and bedtime video. Nevertheless, his daughters were exhausted by motherhood, which had come to them late, as a bit of biological moonlighting from their thriving professional careers; conception had been rife with psychic tension and childbirth fraught with peril. His sons spoke solemnly, apprehensively to him about the education of their children and, even more distant, the job prospects available to these toddlers in the twenty-first century. They both, his two sons, performed some inscrutable monkey business among computers and equities, and they thought in long-range demographic curves. Ed had to laugh, being interviewed by them as a kind of pioneer, a survivor of a mythic age of domesticity, when giant parents walked the earth. "You were there," he reminded them. "You remember how it was. Our key concept was benign neglect." But they would not be put off and, indeed, half persuaded him that he had been an epic family man, chopping forests into cabins in the wilderness of the baby boom.

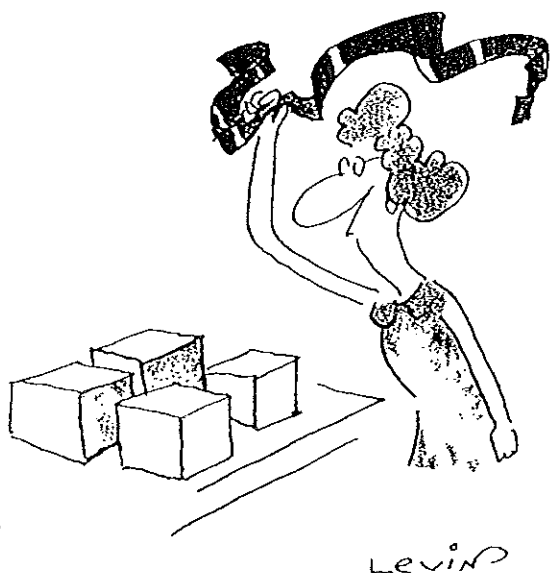
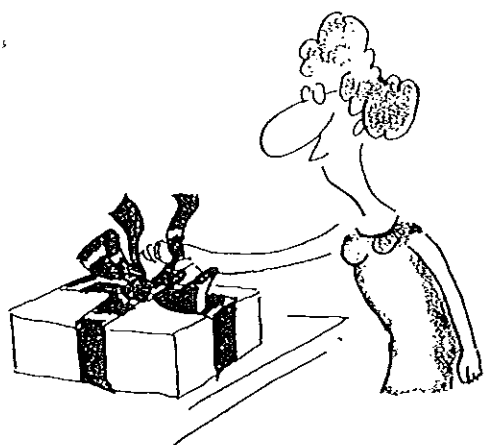
Tracking their own children's progress, they asked him how old they had

been when they first crawled, walked, talked, and read, and he was embarrassed to say that he could not remember. "Ask your mother," he told them.

"She says she doesn't remember, either. She says we were all wonderfully normal."

An only child, born in the Depression, Ed had been honored at his birth with the purchase of a big white book, its padded cover proudly embossed "Baby's Book," in which pages printed in dove-colored ink waited for the entry of his early achievements and the dates thereof. He was surprised to discover that his mother, in that little curly backward-slanting hand that seemed to his eyes the very distillation of methodical maternity, had entered everything up through his various graduations and his first wedding; she had not bothered with her grandchildren or his second nuptials. How odd it is, he thought, that America's present prosperity, based upon our outworking the Germans and the Japanese, has produced the same pinched, anxiously cherishing families as the Depression. His children's individual developments had become in his failing mind an amiable tangle while he daily dined on the social equivalent of buffalo meat.

THE lack of recall almost frightened him. Did he help the kids with their homework? He must have. Did he and Alissa ever go grocery shopping together? He had no image of it. The beds, how had they got made, and the meals, how had they got onto the table for twenty-two years? Alissa must have done it all, somehow, while he was reading the sports page. Having the babies, now such a momentous rite of New Age togetherness and unashamed body-worship, was something else she had done alone, in the hospital, without complication or much complaint afterward; the baby just appeared in a basket beside her bed, or at her breast, and in a few days he drove the two of them home, two where there had been one, a doubling like a magic trick whose secret was too quick for the eye. The last childbirth, he did remember, came on a winter midnight, and the obstetrician, awakened, had swung by



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his car for her, and she had looked smiling from the snowy street, like Christmas caroller, and disappeared to the doctor's two-tone Buick. Left me with the residue of their children, he had been jittery, he remembered, and convinced that a burglar or sized invader was in the big creaky house with him, and had fallen asleep after taking a golf club—a three-iron, selected for its length—into bed with him, for protection.

He tried to picture Alissa with a vacuum cleaner and couldn't, though he remembered himself, in the dining room of the first house they had lived in, wielding a wallpaper steamer, pushing the big square pan against the wall for a minute or two and stripping the paper with a broad putty knife. He, in drenched shorts and T-shirt,

wading through curling wet sheets of faded silver flowers. Once a week, in that same room, she would serve flank steak, it came to him, the brown meat nicely tucked around a core of peppery stuffing, and the whole platter, garnished with parsley and little red-skinned potatoes, redolent of bygone home economics, of those touching fifties-born culinary ambitions that sought to perpetuate a sense of the family meal as a pious ceremony heavy with female labor. All those meals slavishly served, and in the end he had cast her away like an outworn shoe. Vanessa and he, with no children to feed, had become grazers, snackers, eaters-out, sometimes taking their evening meal separately, picking at microwave-safe containers while Peter Jennings put warmth into the news.

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"But what did you do about *sleep*? About children waking up all night?" one of his hardworking daughters, with tender blue shadows beneath her eyes, persisted.

"You all slept through, virtually from birth," he told her, suspecting he was lying but unable to locate the truth of it. There had been a child whimpering about an earache and falling asleep with the hurting ear pressed against the heat of a fresh-ironed dish towel. But was this himself as a child? He could not remember Alissa with an iron in her hand. He did remember getting out of bed in the pit of night and bringing a squalling armful of protoplasm back to bed and handing it to Alissa, who was already sitting up with her nightie straps lowered, her bare chest shining. He would go back to sleep to the sound of tiny lips sucking, little feet softly kicking. He had been the baby, it seemed. Yet no social workers came to the door to rescue his children from abuse, no neighbors complained to the authorities, the children went off to the school bus dressed like the others—like little clowns in the space-age outfits of synthetic fabrics decades removed from the dark woollens, always damp, that he himself had worn—and rose more or less smoothly through the passages of school and, like smart bombs, found colleges and mates and jobs, so he must have been an adequate parent and householder. "It frightens me," he confessed to his daughter, "how little I remember."

The Saturday afternoons of it all, the masculine feats of maintenance, the changing of the storm windows to screens, the cellar workbench where spiders built webs across the clutter of rusting tools. The heating, electricity, telephone, and water bills—he could not see himself writing a single check, but he must have written many, all cashed, cancelled, and stored in Alissa's attic, along with the slides, the scrapbooks, the school reports and tinted school photographs that had accumulated over twenty-two years of days, each with its ups and downs, its mishaps, its sniffles, its excited tales told by children venturing toward adulthood, through a world that on every side was new to them. Ed

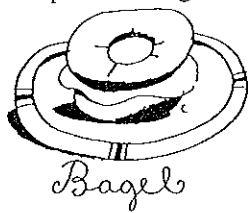
had lost the anatomy. He was like an astronomer before the Voyagers, before the Hubble telescope, working with blurs. He remembered being in love with one or another man's wife, getting drunk after dinner, Alissa having gone to bed, and listening over and over to "Born to Lose," by Ray Charles, or maybe it was the Supremes' "Stop! In the Name of Love," lifting the player arm from the LP time and again to regroove the band, and being told with a shy smile the next morning by his older son, "You sure listened to that song a lot last night." The curtains for a moment parted; there was a second of shamed focus. His son's bedroom was where Ed had sat sunk in himself and the revolving grooves; he had kept the boy, who had to get up for school, awake.

And what of his girls' dating, that traditional tragicomedy, with its overtones of Attic patricide, in the age of the sitcom? His older daughter had gone off to boarding school when she was fifteen, and his younger daughter had been but twelve when he left the house. He could scarcely remember a single hot rod swerving into the crackling driveway to carry off one of his trembling virgins.

NOW this younger daughter invited him to have drinks on a boat. He didn't have to drink liquor, of course, she explained. More and more people didn't; it interfered with their training routines. She herself ran in local marathons; her hair, which like Alissa's had begun to turn white early, was cut short as a boy's, to lower wind resistance, he supposed. The deal was this, Dad: the husband of a friend of theirs was turning forty, and she was giving him as one of his presents a sunset cruise in the marshes, and since his parents were coming the friend, the wife—are you following this, Dad?—wanted some other members of the older generation to be there, so could you and Vanessa come, since you know I guess the husband's father from playing a few golf tournaments with him? Actually, when he shook his peer's hand, under the canopy of the flat-bottomed cruise boat, he remembered him as

an opponent who had once illegally switched balls on the eighteenth green and then sunk the putt to win the match. At the time, Ed hadn't wished to undergo the social embarrassment of complaining to the officials, but he had avoided club tournaments ever since; now the man—one of those odious exultant retirees with a face increased and thickened by an all-year tan—crowed over that remembered triumph. His wife, who was somewhat younger than he, and preeningly dressed in clothes that would have looked less garish in Florida, fastened onto Vanessa as her only soul mate. Ed drifted away, trying to hide among the drinking young couples, to whom he had nothing to say. Not drinking did that—it deprived you of things to say.

How strange it was to be once more at a party where the women were still menstruating. Lean, smart, they moved and twittered and struck poses with an electricity like that in silent movies, which look speeded up. The men in their checked jackets and pastel slacks were boyish and broad—relatively clumsy foils for their wives' animation, which in the shuffle of the party kept sprouting new edges, abrupt new angles of slightly startled loveliness. Ed inhaled, as if to extract from the salt air the scent of their secretions, their secrets. It had been at parties like this that he had met Vanessa Bradley, had mingled with her and her husband.



The similarity of her name to Alissa's had been one of the attractions; she would be a wife with a "v" added, for vim and vigor, for vivacity and vagina and victory. He

had fallen in love with her, she had fallen with him, and here they were, more than twenty years later.

The boat trundled, with its burden of canned music and clinking drinks and celebrating couples, out through the winding channel between the black-mud banks of the golden-green marsh toward the wider water, where islands crammed with shingled summer houses slowly changed position, starboard to port, as the captain put it through a scenic half circle. There was a white lighthouse, and a stunning sunstruck slope where some

baron of old had decreed a symmetrical pattern of trimmed shrubs like a great ideogram, and a mock-Tudor cluster as tight as an Italian hilltop village, the eaves and dormer peaks beaded with ruddy low light, and a marina whose pale masts stood as thick as wheat, and a nappy blue-green far stretch of wooded land miraculously yet undeveloped, and the eastward horizon of the open sea already darkening to receive its first starlight while the undulating land to the west still basked under luminous salmon stripes. Ed silently gazed outward at all this, and his fellow-passengers gave it moments of notice, but the main thrust of their attention was inward, toward each other, in bright and gnashing conversations growing shrill as the drinks sank in, a feast of love drowning out the canned music. That was how it was, how he had been, the living moment awash with beauty ignored in the quest for a better moment, slightly elsewhere, with some slightly differing other, while the weeds grew in the peony beds, and dust balls gathered beneath the sofa, and the children, unobserved, plotted their own escapes, their own elsewhere.

A few children had come along with their parents and, after being admonished not to fall overboard, fended for themselves. To one boy, rapt beside him at the rail, Ed on the homeward swing pointed out a headland and a rosy mansion whose name he knew, beyond the marsh grasses now drinking in darkness as the tide slipped away from their roots. Vanessa, on the drive home, volunteered, "The birthday boy's father's wife and I have a number of mutual acquaintances, it turned out. She said an old college roommate of mine, Angela Hart, just had a double mastectomy." Ed thought of confiding in turn how magically strange he had found it to be again among fertile women, with all the excitement that bred, but, though he might in his youthful cruelty have once said something like this to Alissa—anything to get her to respond, to get the blood flowing—between Vanessa and him there had come to prevail the tact of two cripples, companion victims of time. ♦